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Article

Growing Religiosity Among Central Asian Migrants in Russia Why Does Migration 'Theologise'?

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This article analyses why a significant number of Central Asian migrants become more religious in Russia than they were at home. Although debate is emerging on the influence of migration on the religiosity of Central Asians in Russia, it is not yet clear in what circumstances migration 'theologizes'. Here, we use the word 'theologize' to indicate how migration leads a migrant to become more religious.

Insecurity and contexts of reception theories are used in answering this question. I argue that the insecurity theory that was tested in mostly Western countries to explain growing religiosity of immigrants should be looked upon more broadly when applied to other contexts. The very living conditions of a labour migrant, the environment in which he lives, and circumstances he faces every day in Russia incline and push him to seek solace and comfort in religion. It is suggested that the feelings of insecurity—not only economic (mostly in terms of finding a job), but also psychological and existential—are critical factors in such circumstances. Previous research on immigrant religiosity in the West has mostly focused on economic and, to a lesser degree, existential aspects of insecurity while explaining the religious behaviour of immigrants. However, while not ignoring the importance of feelings of economic security, I argue that in the Russian case, psychological and existential (physical) insecurities play a more apparent role in affecting the religious behaviour of many Central Asian labour migrants. Sources of insecurity include but are not limited to bad living conditions far away from close family members, the local population's xenophobia, psychological and financial pressure from officials (police and immigration authorities), contrasts in the cultures of migrants' own and host countries, and secluded lifestyle within their own groups.

In this regard, by examining more deeply the migrants' feelings of insecurity, specific aspects peculiar to the growing religiosity among Central Asian migrants in Russia are explored.

Keywords: Migration, Religion, Central Asia, Russia

Introduction

For the last several years, Russia has been a major destination for international migrants. There were more than 10 million migrants in the country as of November 2016 (RBK, 2016). Around four million people come from Central Asian countries¹. Currently, there are 1.9 million people from Uzbekistan, 1.06 million people from Tajikistan and 620,000 people from Kyrgyzstan in Russia (RANEP, 2017). Labour migration from Central Asian countries has been the preferred livelihood strategy due to poverty, lack of jobs and other adverse economic conditions in their home countries.

Most of these migrants travel to Russia for seasonal work; depending on the availability of jobs, many migrants return to their home countries in winter and travel again to Russia in spring. Harsh socio-economic situations and labour force redundancy are major factors in the formation of such a mass labour migration to Russia

¹ Central Asian migrants in Russia come mainly from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The number of migrants from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan in Russia is significantly low.

(Marat, 2009; Urinboev, 2017). Migrants send home a considerable amount of their wages. In 2016, approximately USD 7 billion were sent to home countries by Central Asian migrants in Russia (Migrant Ferghana, 2017).

Most of the migrants from Central Asia in Russia are employed in low-paid, low-skilled, and socially inferior jobs in construction, trade, transport, and housing services. The overwhelming majority of migrants live in appalling conditions (Gorst, 2011). Most of the labour migrants are undocumented² which impedes their adaptation to local contexts. They are often subject to police checks and have to bribe law enforcement and other government officials. The health of most Central Asians deteriorates during their stay in Russia as they are routinely exposed to bad living conditions, poor hygiene, as well as lack of or limited access to health care, etc. (Marat, 2013). In order to save as much money as possible, most migrants choose to live in large groups crammed into small apartments and barracks.

On the other hand, a growing number of Russians perceives migrants as potential criminals and carriers of alien socio-cultural and ethno-religious identities (Kolsto & Blakkisrud, 2016). This has led to growing suspicion and dislike by the local population, mostly by ethnic Russians and Orthodox Slavs, towards ever-growing masses of Central Asian migrants that are Muslims in their majority (Buryanov, 2007). The media's negative portrayal of migrants has led the general population, activists, and right-wing groups to urge government agencies to reinforce stricter control of migrant inflows and even the use of force in anti-immigration campaigns (Mukomel, 2014).

As a response, most of the migrants from Central Asia in Russia now observe social distance from the local people for safety and security reasons. They tend to live in their enclosed communities. Migrants remain closed in their ethnic or regional social network, and live a largely isolated lifestyle (IWPR, 2014).

In this regard, Islam, a religion of the overwhelming majority of Central Asian migrants, provides what they seek. What we can observe in this situation is that many Central Asian migrants become more religious when they are in a host country such as Russia. They may not always consider themselves overly Muslim when they are at home (de Cordier, 2015; Roche, 2014; Tucker, 2015).

Apart from scholars, Russian, Western, and Central Asian mass media channels have been reporting for the last several years on stories of many young people who have become more religious while working as migrants in Russia. Several stories especially in the last year concern those 'former migrants' who have found themselves among the fighters of the Islamic State in Syria. Concerns that many migrants were radicalizing during their stay in Russia were expressed by government officials and state-controlled media of Central Asian states as well (Uzbekistan TV 2017). This tendency has spread further since the April 2017 terrorist attack in St. Petersburg (allegedly committed by people of Central Asian origin), following which a Russian security chief alleged that Central Asian labour migrant communities were 'a hotbed of terrorism in Russia.'

This article does not claim that migration 'theologises' all or even the majority of Central Asian migrant workers in Russia. In most cases there is no direct correlation between migration and the migrants' religious devotion; many people do not change their religious practices before, during or after migration (Abashin, 2017). Moreover, thousands of migrants hardly have time to think about religion under the pressure of long and tiring work conditions. Nevertheless, there is a significant number of migrants from Central Asia who become more pious and devout while living and working in Russia and their case should not be ignored. The reasons and roots for this growing religiosity deserve a thorough analysis.

So, why do some Central Asian migrants become more religious in Russia than when at home? There is a growing literature explaining the reason for radicalization of Central Asians as a response to strict government control and oppressive policies towards religious people in home countries in the region. In answering the central question of this paper—why migrants who are not necessarily observant at home become more religious upon migration to Russia—I argue that the insecurity theory used in mostly Western countries to explain the growing religiosity of immigrants should be looked upon more broadly. Migrants' dire living conditions in Russia push them to search for solace and comfort in Islam. It is argued that the feelings of insecurity—not only economic (in terms of finding a job, mostly), but also psychological and existential—are critical factors in such circumstances. Literature on the religiosity of immigrants in the West mostly focus on economic and, to a lesser degree, existential aspects of insecurity to explain the religious behaviour of immigrants. However, the case of Central Asian labour migrants in Russia is different because both Russians and Central Asians for several decades lived in a single state where atheism was advanced by state authorities. The religiosity of Central Asian migrants differs from that of their 'counterparts' in Western countries and most of them do not plan to stay in Russia permanently, i.e., their strategies of assimilating and adapting differ reasonably. Another serious difference is the extremely high level of xenophobia in Russia, mostly by ethnic Russians, towards Central Asians. These differences create distinct sources of feelings of insecurity. This article argues that psychological and existential (physical) insecurities play greater roles in affecting the religious behaviour of many Central Asian migrants while at the same time not ignoring the importance of feelings of economic insecurity.

² Migrants from Central Asia do not need a visa to enter Russia. However, in order to legally stay and work, migrants need work permits (*patent*) and register a place of residence. Unlike in Western countries, a Central Asian migrant can enter Russia legally, but may become illegal or undocumented if he or she overstays the allowed period (90 days) and/or works without proper documents.

Empirical data for this article was gathered in short field trips to Russia and during interviews with migrants from Central Asia in 2013-2015. The interviews took place in Russia and Uzbekistan, and were conducted via Skype. Life stories of several migrants from Central Asia serve as the main data for analysis. At the same time, this article refers to mass-media stories of those 'former' migrants who have left Russia to take part in the Syrian conflict.

In 'measuring' religiosity, several scholars have used the Duke University Religion Index (DUREL) measurement in their quantitative studies. The DUREL assesses three major dimensions of religiosity: a) organizational religious activity (ORA) involving public religious activities such as attending religious services or participating in other group-related religious activity (Friday prayers, religious holidays, etc., in this case); b) non-organizational religious activity (NORA) consisting of religious activities performed in private, such as prayer, reading religious textbooks, watching/listening to religious videos/recordings; and c) intrinsic religiosity (or subjective religiosity) assessing the degree of personal religious commitment or motivation (Koenig & Bussing, 2010). However, in this mostly qualitative paper, using the above-mentioned instrument would not be feasible due to the sample size and the scope and character of this research. Instead, I analyze the migrants' personal perceptions of their religiosity. Clarifying inquiries such as the number of prayers per day or week, frequency of attending Friday mass prayers, as well as personal attitudes towards the Divinity in a migrant's home country and in Russia will serve as complementary questions. This method, though not without shortcomings, should help more or less correctly assess (the change in) one's religiosity.

In the first section, I provide a review of literature to explore different hypotheses and theories used by Western scholars. The second section will discuss the living conditions of a migrant in a host country and how he perceives the host society's attitudes. This will help us establish differences in the living conditions of immigrants and environment they find themselves in the Western countries and in Russia. In other words, peculiarities of the social context in Russia for becoming more religious will be elaborated. The third section reveals real stories of migrants both interviewed and conveyed via mass media who have become more religious while working and living in Russia. In the fourth section, the main argument of the article will be discussed.

1. Theoretical framework and literature review

The religiosity of migrants and immigrants has been an important topic of discussion for the last couple of decades. There is abundant work on how immigration affects the identity of an immigrant:

In itself, immigrant identity is a particular one since it involves the re-evaluation of oneself and one's identity when being situated in a strange environment and surrounded by different customs, traditions, and language to which the immigrant is expected to adjust (Hashmi, 2003 in Duderija, 2007: 145).

For a long time, scholars paid little attention to or had no interest in exploring the issue of immigrants' religiosity or how immigration influences religious behaviour (Cadge & Ecklund, 2007). Smith (1978) was one of the first to insist that immigration was indeed a 'theologizing experience'. He noted that immigrants turn to religion in trying to respond to the challenges of resettlement, whereas religious organizations served as places of mutual assistance and support.

Only starting from the 1990s did scholars start discussing in earnest the impact of immigration on people's religiosity. The impact of immigration on religious practices of immigrants has been for the last two decades hotly discussed by Western scholars. Most of them have stated that immigrants tend to rediscover new meanings in their own religion in a new country of destination and become more religious (see Alanezi & Sherkat, 2008; Aleksynska & Chiswick, 2013; Cadge & Ecklund, 2007; Duderija, 2007; Ebaugh & Chafez, 2000; Garcia-Munoz & Neuman, 2013; van Tubergen & Sindradottir, 2011; Warner & Wittner, 1998; Yang & Ebaugh, 2001). According to Williams (1998), for example, "immigrants are religious—by all counts more religious than they were before they left home —because religion is one of the important identity markers that help preserve individual self-awareness and cohesion in the group" (p. 29).

Some researchers have claimed that immigration may result in a decline in religious practices of immigrants (e.g., Connor, 2009; Massey & Higgins, 2011; van Tubergen, 2013). However, while there is little consensus on whether migration positively or negatively affects immigrants' religiosity, almost all scholars find a direct relationship between (im)migration and (im)migrants' religiosity.

While most scholars agree that in most cases immigrants are more religious than the local population, the debate is not yet settled as to the reasons and incentives that lie behind this religiosity. In the course of debates and discussions since the late 1990s, various theories and hypotheses were developed to explain this phenomenon. I summarize the major contributions these theories below.

Why do some immigrants start attending religious congregations and praying more often than other immigrants? One of the popular answers to this question has been provided by *secularisation theory*. According to this theory, people's religiosity depends on their country's level of development. In modern and developed

countries, people are less religious than in more traditional and developing countries. Renowned scholars such as Emile Durkheim (1915/2008) and Max Weber (1922/1993) were among those who predicted a diminishing role for religion as countries become more developed. Similarly, the level of religiosity of immigrants who move to more developed countries should diminish under the influence of the host society.

However, this theory has received strong criticism from other scholars (Berger, 1999). The cases of different levels of religiosity in both the modern United States and Western Europe can serve as an objection to this theory. Questions were raised why in the United States, one of the most developed countries in the world, religious attendance is higher than in less developed countries, and why in Europe people are less religious despite the modernization process (Iannaccone, 1998; Stark, 1999 in Ruiter & van Tubergen, 2009).

In responding to critics of the secularization theory, the 'scientific worldview theory' gained more support (e.g., Need & Graaf, 1996). This theory suggests that the more educated the individuals are, the less religious they become and the role of religion will decrease with social development (e.g., Smits, Ruiter & van Tubergen, 2010; van Tubergen & Sindradottir, 2011). Massey and Higgins (2011) have found that immigration is a disruptive event that alienates immigrants from religious practice rather than 'theologizes' them.

Another theory—*religious markets* or *rational choice theory*—suggests that there is a constant demand for religion and different levels of religiosity in various countries can be explained by the supply of religious products in religious markets (Stark & Bainbridge, 1987; Stark & Finke, 2000; Stark & Iannaccone, 1998). Competition between religious markets is one of the key factors influencing peoples' religiosity; hence the more diverse and quality products that are offered, the more people—consumers—will consume these religious products. However, Chavez and Gorski (2001) argued that "the claim that religious pluralism and religious participation are generally and positively associated with one another—the core empirical hypothesis of the market approach to the study of religion—is not supported" (p. 274).

Some scholars have concluded that religion offers *social capital* (Hirschman, 2004; Connor, 2011). Hirschman (2004) argues that religion provides migrants with three 'Rs': resources, respect, and refuge for smooth adaptation in a new society; religious organizations provide resources and respect for immigrants in terms of assistance with housing, education, language skills, and employment. The term refuge is important for this research because it "denotes the psychological relief immigrants experience through religious practice with religious organizations" (Connor 2011: 1350).

Scholars have also emphasized the role of *contexts of reception* in immigrant religiosity. Different definitions and typologies of the contexts of reception were developed (Baubock, 1996; Cadge & Ecklund, 2007; Connor, 2010; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). This hypothesis was also explored as social integration theory (Need & de Graaf, 1996; van Tubergen & Sindradottir, 2011). Baubock (1996) introduced a typology of contexts of reception as segregation, assimilation, and accommodation. Portes and Rumbaut (2006) see government policies of a host country as a form of context of reception for immigrant adaptation. They offer a typology of three immigrant receptivity contexts: exclusion of immigrants, passive acceptance, and active encouragement. Building on this, Connor (2010) found that "less welcoming contexts create an 'us' versus 'them' scenario triggering a hyper-religious commitment among Muslims" in Europe (p. 281).

Ghaffari and Ciftci (2010) approach immigrant religiosity from a psychological perspective. They claim that there is a significant relationship between 'perceived discrimination' and both religious attitudes and religious behaviour: "perceiving discrimination may encourage Muslims to use their faith in coping with stress from the discriminatory experience" (p. 22).

Another theory developed to explain the relatively higher religiosity of immigrants is *insecurity theory*. Norris and Inglehart (2004) argued that religiosity of individuals is shaped by the level of insecurity they feel. People who feel secure have less need for a religion. On the other hand, those who experience insecurity tend to be more religious. Immerzeel and van Tubergen (2013) argue that "religiosity is higher among people who have an insecure job position, whose parents were unemployed, whose parents had a lower status job, who have experienced a war in their country, who have lost their partner, and who reside in a country with a lower social welfare spending and a higher unemployment rate" (p. 359).

The theory suggests that insecurities can be existential (Norris & Inglehart, 2004), financial (economic) (van Tubergen & Sindradottir, 2011), or both (Immerzeel & van Tubergen, 2013). Moreover, the latter have concluded that both economic and existential, past and present, and individual and contextual insecurities are important in explaining different levels of religiosity in different countries.

Several scholars debated the religiosity of immigrants in North America (e.g., Alanezi & Sherkat, 2008; Chen, 2006; Connor, 2008; Connor, 2009; Warner & Wittner, 1998). Discussions on the religious practices of immigrants in Europe have also been held in several Western European countries (Connor, 2010; Hashmi, 2003; Maliepard, Lubbers, & Gijsberts, 2010; Ruiter & van Tubergen, 2009; Smits, Ruiter & van Tubergen, 2010; van Tubergen, 2007; van Tubergen & Sindradottir, 2011). As we can see, the case of immigrant religiosity in Western societies has been widely discussed. The findings of the above-mentioned scholars can be especially relevant to identity issues of Muslims (and others) in North America and several Western European countries. However, this

discussion is applicable mostly to the Muslims in the West, while the case with Central Asian migrants in Russia does not necessarily have the same root causes.

Although studies on Central Asian migration in Russia have grown significantly in number recently, especially among Russian scholars, little research has been done on religious practices of these migrants in the host society.

Olimova and Bosc in 2003 far-sightedly raised the topic of growing religiosity among Central Asian migrants: "While working in Russia, many migrants rediscover Islam. It is not surprising that religious values are beginning to play an increasingly important role" (p. 122). However, this assertion comes as a short note made in passing.

During his fieldwork in the Vakhsh Valley of Tajikistan, De Cordier (2013) observed that migrants who come back from Russia to their home towns and villages had become more religious than they were before traveling to Russia. As an illustration, he quoted a response by one of his interviewees:

So for me, my brother and my cousin who were with me there at one time, and for many of the mates, this presence of the Islamic religion certainly gave some hold and continuity ... So that was encouraging. Probably it inspired others too, because some of the men from our area who came to live with us and who were not observant became so when they were with us. As far as we saw, no one dropped religion altogether there (p. 529).

Though de Cordier grasped the tendency in a Tajik province, his article does not comprehensively answer the posed question: he only discusses how labour migration has affected identity issues of many returning Tajik migrants in a specific area in Tajikistan. The questions of why, how, and in what circumstances migrants become more religious in Russia rather than they were before going to Russia were not answered in full.

Since the launch of the Central Eurasia-Religion in International Affairs (CERIA) initiative, several briefs were prepared that analyze how religious identities and the religious behaviour of some Central Asian migrants change after having lived and worked in Russia (Roche, 2014; Tucker, 2015). In particular, discussing why people with no previous religious practices become more religious and even get radicalized, Tucker (2015) notes that "Central Asians who support or are interested in ISIL appear to mostly be young migrant laborers who have little or no background in Islam as a religion but embrace Islam as an identity that offers solidarity, a sense of belonging and an explanation for economic hardship and discrimination that they experience" (p. 3).

These fragmentary and small-scale studies have not explored in detail the roots and reasons as to why a significant number of Central Asian migrants become more religious while in Russia. The role of Islam as a unifying and consoling factor for many Central Asian Muslim migrants in Russia has yet to be tackled in a thorough analysis.

Contexts of reception and insecurity theories best explain the case of Central Asian labour migrants. Insecurity theory is based on the hypothesis that the more insecure people feel, the more religious they will be. The need for religious belief increases when a person is unable to envisage his/her future, which results in feelings of anxiety. Religious beliefs provide individuals with predictable rules to help them cope with dangers: God promises that in the end everything will be fine, either now or in a possible afterlife. Therefore, when people feel insecure, they are more inclined to follow the rules caused by religious beliefs, which leads to more traditional religious values (Immerzeel & van Tubergen, 2011). In Russia, most Central Asian labour migrants experience insecurity in their everyday lives. Many factors, such as uncertainty of securing a job or getting paid, frequent police abuses, attacks by radical right-wing nationalist groups, risks of being deported and many others contribute to the feeling of insecurity. Looking at the growing religiosity of some migrants through the prism of insecurity theory helps explain the roots and causes for this phenomenon.

According to the context of reception theory, the context the immigrants live in affects how they construct themselves and their sense of belonging. If the local population and social surroundings in a new society present a positive and welcoming context for reception, then immigrants tend to be less religious and more susceptible to the local population's behaviour and cultural values. On the other hand, if the context of reception is negative, or in other words, the environment is hostile, then immigrants are more likely to react by constructing alternative identities (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006; Stepick & Stepick, 2009). They will resort to their own religious (national, cultural) values in building these identities. As many Central Asian migrants perceive Russia as a negative or unwelcoming context of reception, we have reason to believe that this theory will be helpful to see how perceived discrimination leads some migrants to become more religious.

2. Migrant Living Conditions and its "Theologising" Effect

(1) Central Asian labour migrants in Russia

Most Central Asians in Russia are seasonal labour migrants (Olimova, 2013), although the number of those who seek Russian citizenship has grown recently. They may stay in Russia from several months to several years.

Migrants in their majority are alone or, in some cases, accompanied by their male siblings or sons/fathers (sometimes whole families). Around 85 per cent of migrants from Central Asia are male and almost three out of four are younger than 30 (Argumenty i Fakty, 2013). Laruelle (2007), though, distinguishes two age groups of migrants: young people in their twenties, who have to pay for a wedding or the building of a house; and older men in their forties or fifties, who need more sporadic financing for family celebrations such as children's weddings, circumcision ceremonies, or the expansion of family property.

The older generation is statistically more educated and generally has a good command of Russian. As a result, they find better and more skilled jobs. The younger ones, who constitute the largest portion of migrants, are less skilled, have a poor command of Russian, and consequently get low-paying jobs (Laruelle, 2007). Migrants are employed in construction, cleaning services, trade, heavy industry and agricultural works.

In recent years, the number of female migrants from Central Asia, especially from Kyrgyzstan, has increased. Women may accompany their family members or seek a job on their own with the help of social ties. Another group of Central Asians in Russia is students, who in small numbers compared to labour migrants study in Russia's higher education institutions either under Russian government scholarship quotas or through self-financing. Given that both women and students constitute a small number in comparison to labour migrants, this research's focus will be on the average migrant: a young male from a rural area of Central Asia with a secondary education.

Notwithstanding the fact that Russia is one of the largest immigration destinations with more than 11 million foreigners, the country's relevant agencies still have shortcomings and deficiencies in regulating and legalizing the flux of migrants. Starting from January 2015, authorities introduced a new *patent*³ system for foreign workers from those countries with which Russia has a visa-free regime (including Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan). At the same time, punishment for breaching the country's immigration laws was toughened (e.g., deportations, fines, temporary imprisonment, bans from re-entering the country for five to ten years). Though an important step in regulating the migration sphere, the new rules also have failed to regularise large numbers of illegal migrant workers.

As a result of large flows of migrants and their failure to meet the criteria to obtain *patent*, hundreds of thousands of migrants from Central Asia even today remain undocumented. Working in Russia illegally without work permits and permanent residence status is widespread (Ilkhamov, 2006; Urinboyev 2017).

Migrant workers' undocumented or illegal—a term widely used by Russian officials, media and migrants themselves—status makes them very vulnerable to frequent police abuses. Most migrants have to secure a certain amount of their budget to bribe corrupt police officers and other authorities. Migrants save as much money as possible so they can send more remittances to impoverished families in home countries. In order to save money, many migrants choose to live in large groups in small ill-furnished apartments, barracks or even in spontaneously built construction sites.

In many cases, even having all proper documents protects a migrant from abuses. According to a Russian migration expert, currently neither (proper) document, nor *patent*, nor registration provides reliable legal protection for a migrant. He can easily be detained, subjected to administrative punishment, and even deported (Sputnik, 2017).

One migrant estimated that he spent 15 per cent of his earnings bribing police officers (Eurasia.net, 2013). But often even having a legal work permit does not provide refuge from maltreatment by officials. Human rights activists and mass media report instances of cruelty and exploitation at workplaces as well as ill-treatment of migrants in detention and deportation facilities (HRW, 2013; HRW, 2017).

In many cases employers also take advantage of a migrant's vulnerable situation: they offer much less wages to migrants than to ordinary Russians, knowing that the former has little, if any, choice. At the same time, employers may postpone or even refuse the payment of wages. As more than half of employment contracts among migrants in Russia are brokered without any written documents, between 35 to 50 per cent of migrants in cities like Moscow and Saint Petersburg are not paid for their work (Marat, 2013). "Migrants increasingly face deteriorating conditions of employment in addition to rising administrative barriers and hostile attitudes from local populations, including abuse and harassment" (Olimova, 2013: 72). Russian authorities use bans on employment and restrictions on mobility as effective mechanisms for extracting fines and bribes while also perpetuating the perception of the migrant as a threat (Matusevich, 2017).

(2) Real Xenophobia or "Perceived Discrimination"?

Most local people in Russia perceive labour migrants from Central Asia as a distinct and alien group that may pose a threat to Russian and Orthodox culture and values. In Russian media and government reports, irregular and illegal migration, especially from Central Asia, has been associated with growing organized crime, mounting shadow economy, unhygienic working and housing conditions, as well as an extra burden on social services. If in the 1990s Chechens were portrayed as the main enemy, later in the 2000s the media started the active cultivation of a negative image of migrants from Central Asia (Shnirelman, 2007).

³ In Russia, a work permit for migrant workers is called *patent*.

At the same time, in some cases, the behaviour, lifestyle and activities of migrants provoke the hostility of the local population. However, it remains a fact that migrants often encounter hostility and xenophobia in different levels and in different places, including public transport, public places, social service and administrative offices.

The widespread belief among local populations that migrants ‘take away’ jobs forces the governments of destination countries to toughen their migratory policies. Since these beliefs are broadcast by the mass media, they promote discrimination and xenophobia, and increase tensions between countries of destination and origin. As a result, labor migrants face increasing political and administrative risks in their countries of destination (Olimova, 2013: 68-69).

Public discourse about migrants as unwanted guests in Russia is widespread. It is very often that Russian officials, media agencies, and TV shows openly assign the migrants the role of the “other,” of cultural aliens, who have low levels of culture and who must be sent back to their home countries. “A migrant is not just—as the academic definition requires—any ‘relocating’ person but an ‘other’ who, it is implied, poses some sort of ‘threat’ and ‘danger’ to the ‘receiving society.’ In the cultural classification, the word ‘migrant’ has turned in essence into a legal euphemism for the expression of nationalist and racial prejudices” (Abashin, 2013: 13). It is not a coincidence that Russia ranked 123 among 136 countries with a 2.6 index score out of a possible 9.0, according to the Gallup’s Migrant Acceptance Index (Gallup, 2017).

All these factors have brought about a situation where suspicion towards Muslims among local Russians is growing. Racial (or ethno-religious) tension is so volatile that ordinary quarrels often grow into inter-ethnic clashes. These include, but are not limited to, the Kondopoga events (2006), the Manezhnaia riots (2010), the Moscow mayoral election (2013), the Biryulevo riots (2015), and the death of baby Umarali Nazarov (2015). Although in recent years, experts have noted a slight decrease in xenophobic sentiments in Russian society due to the changing focus of the media to events in the Ukraine and Russia’s deteriorating relations with the West, a blast in the St. Petersburg metro (underground) in April 2017, allegedly perpetrated by Akbarjon Jalilov, an ethnic Uzbek from Kyrgyzstan with Russian citizenship, and its aftermath have again raised anti-migrant attitudes in Russia.

Reports of the SOVA Center, a Moscow-based think tank, on xenophobia and racism in Russia are worth noting. In the first half of 2017, six people were killed and 16 were injured (or beaten) on racist bases (SOVA Center, 2017). Attacks usually target those perceived as “ethnic outsiders.”

The practice of “white cars,” when ultra-right radicals walk through train cars beating up passengers of “non-Slavic appearance,” still exist. Many migrants are also afraid of raids by ultra-rightist groups in search of “illegal migrants.” These raids do not always proceed peacefully despite the fact that the police (and sometimes media) are often present. Activists of unofficial organizations such as *Shchit Moskvy* (The Shield of Moscow) usually raid the residences of migrant workers demanding to see the residents’ documents. Those who cannot provide proper documents are usually thrown out into the street or even attacked in some cases. Raids against sellers of fruits and vegetables on streets also happen often and end with throwing goods on the ground.

All these factors put hundreds of thousands of migrants from Central Asia into a difficult situation, forcing them to stay away from public spaces and remain within their enclosed enclaves as much as possible. Migrants try to find housing within the close proximity of their work places so as to avoid or minimize using public transport. “Racism has now become an integral part of the everyday life of Central Asian migrants. They face discrimination in the housing market, unfair treatment when attempting to access social services, and repeated insults” (Laruelle, 2007:112).

3. “Religion Gave Me Hope”: Stories of “Theologized” Migrants

In such unfavourable conditions, it is perhaps natural that the migrants turn to religion. This section is conditionally divided into two parts. First, selected stories of migrants who have become more religious, become radicalized and even found themselves in the battleground in Syria conveyed through mass media will be addressed. Second, the author’s interviews with migrants who have either become more religious or whose interest in Islam has grown during their stay in Russia are discussed.

As an illustration of migrants turning to Islam, the BBC Russian Service tells a story of Umed Sobirov from Tajikistan, who became more interested in religion after having worked in Russia. His sister is quoted saying, “We don’t go to the mosque and we are not religious people. Such was my brother before going to Moscow, and he returned very pious, praying five times a day and trying to live by the laws of Islam.” Umed himself explains his behaviour simply: “Religion gave me what I was looking for: calmness and hope for justice. When there is so much negativity and humiliation, and you do not see light at the end of the tunnel, it is important to believe in something not to get crazy” (BBC, 2013).

The government-controlled Uzbek TV channel *O‘zbekiston* broadcast a story of 27-year-old Nodir Javliev from Uzbekistan who became radicalized in Russia. He and his brother, who had never practised Islam at home,

started praying and became more involved in religion. Nodir went further—he went to Syria to fight for the Islamic State. The programme ends with a claim that many migrants abroad might fall prey to ‘terrorists’ (Ozodlik, 2014).

Noah Tucker (2015) analysed Facebook with regards to how twenty-year-old Shohruh (pseudonym) from Samarkand, Uzbekistan became radicalized while working as a migrant in Russia. “After moving to Russia and living separated from his family and community in 2014 he gave up on dating services and meeting other Uzbek women. His friend network rapidly expanded, filled with popular Uzbek language Islamic devotional sites (none of which he added in the first year he was on Facebook while living in Uzbekistan) and their administrators and popular Uzbek imams, expanding from only 22 total friends in 2013 to a total of 250 in October 2014” (Tucker, 2015: 2). In that month, he began frequently posting Islamic State memes and iconography and changed several times his profile pictures dressed in jihadi military gear and holding an automatic rifle. “A twenty-year-old in Samarqand hoping to use Facebook to meet women and get a job in the United States grew into a twenty-two-year-old migrant worker in Russia for whom fighting for an Islamic State in Iraq or Syria seemed more achievable than finding a girlfriend and living the American dream... Like Shohruh, most who become interested or involved in the conflict [in Iraq and Syria] have little or no theological background and often become abruptly more interested in religion after taking up residence as in a foreigner in a non-Muslim society” (Tucker, 2015: 2-3).

There are many stories reported in mass media about former labour migrants from Central Asia who have left Russia to take part in the fighting in Syria. However, there is no single opinion on the number of Central Asians (mostly former migrant workers) who have left for Syria and Iraq. The International Crisis Group (ICG, 2015), for example, claimed that between 2,000 and 4,000 Central Asians were believed to be in the Islamic State-held territory. However, Lemon and Heathershaw (2017) believe these numbers are overestimated. Regardless of the actual number of Central Asians who left for *jihad*, one thing is true: a significant number of migrants in Russia become more involved in religion than they were before coming to the country. Needless to say, becoming more religious and radicalization should not be equated. There are many migrants who would not consciously choose the radical way of expressing their religiosity and join the *jihadists*. Those who believe they have embarked on the right path continue working to earn and feed their families back in their home countries.

Personal interviews show that in order for a migrant to become more religious, certain circumstances must be present. In other words, ‘theologisation’ happens in specific social contexts of migrant life.

Ortiq, a 28-year-old married man from a rural area in Uzbekistan and one of the main interviewees⁴, offers a clear example of a change in migrant’s religious behaviour. He explained that his interest in religion grew when he was staying in an overcrowded tenement in the first year of his stay in Moscow. “There were ten to twelve people (tenants were not stable, one might leave, another might move in) living in a small apartment: taxi drivers, street-sweepers, sales assistants, and waiters”⁵.

Ortiq, who for the last two years has worked as a porter in a market, plasterer at a construction site, and guard in a private house, describes himself as a person who grew up in a mostly non-religious environment: his parents were not practicing believers and his friends were ‘ordinary’ people. However, living together with people of different backgrounds gradually changed his views on various life issues:

Depending on his work schedule, Rustam-aka, one of the tenants and a respected man with deep knowledge of religion, endeavoured to pray five times a day. He went to Friday prayers and would urge others to practice Islam more actively. A lot of what Rustam-aka said about Allah, the prophet, a good Muslim’s obligations and other religious affairs were new and interesting to me. Though I was sceptical in the beginning, I gradually became interested. Once when I had a day off from my job, I joined Rustam-aka to go to a Friday prayer to the Mosque Yadyam and saw many people of different ethnicities. Though at the time I didn’t pray properly, I felt relieved when I came home. Since then I started to go to Friday prayers whenever I had an opportunity. I learnt several prayers to repeat before bed and at times of difficulty. I witnessed many cases of harassment by nationalists and was longing for my wife and little son living back in Uzbekistan. I had a feeling that the more I believed in God, the easier was for me to overcome these difficulties. Now my wife has joined me and we live in a separate apartment outside Moscow. We are working hard to be able to bring our three-year-old son here (he is now staying with my mother-in-law). Though I attend Friday prayers from time to time (I pray at home very rarely), I strongly believe that when you have faith, it is much easier to overcome difficulties. In a way, religion gave me hope.”⁶

The story of another migrant worker, Alisher (23), from southern Uzbekistan, is similar to that of Ortiq. Alisher has lived in several places in and around Moscow, including a barrack at a construction site. The time he spent in an overcrowded communal house with shared facilities was one of his longest stays:

⁴ Names of all interviewed migrants have been changed.

⁵ Interviews with Ortiq via Skype in Moscow, April 2015.

⁶ Interviews with Ortiq via Skype in Moscow, April 2015.

Too many people, including couples lived at this place (there were even overnight stayers). Using the toilets and bathrooms was very time consuming. To kill time while waiting in the queue, the tired and bored people would play cards, listen to radio, 'hang out' on *Odnoklassniki* (a social network popular in post-Soviet space) or discuss their daily lives in circles. I liked to listen to discussions because people were talking about their problems, while others were offering different, often contradicting, solutions. There were some religious men who prayed at least twice a day and often discussed religious issues. They discouraged those who occasionally drank alcohol 'to heal wounds' or 'to celebrate payday'. Several months later a man from Margilan (in the Ferghana Valley) moved in. Abdurahim-aka was very knowledgeable in Islam and could tell interesting religious stories. Through the influence of several other religious people, Islam became one of the often and hotly discussed topics of evening talks. I respected Abdurahim-aka for his ability to give explanation to various issues from religious point of view in a convincing way. Though I had thought of myself as a believer, I came to realize that I was far from being a proper Muslim.⁷

Alisher, like almost everyone in the communal house, was afraid of serious problems and difficulties: hard working conditions, health problems, withholding of wages, fear of police raids, avoiding encounters with Russian nationalists, missing family relatives, and so on. For him, religion gradually became a source of consolation:

"When I learnt more about Allah and started praying, living through the problems I had seemed easier. I learnt a lot about what being a good Muslim meant. Of course, there were different people and many still would object to religious and sententious speeches, and outside the communal house there were some who disapproved my interest in religion, but for me, religion started to matter as something different. What is so bad about being a nice and devout person?" Alisher said.

Though these two interviewees had different levels of religiosity (in their own understanding) before and after coming to Russia, one thing is true for them and many other migrants: their living conditions in a big city with problems and difficulties inherent to migrants has made them more susceptible to religious sentiments.

There are two more points that can be inferred from interviews with these and other migrants. First, migrants enjoy relative freedom of religious practice and access to (religious) information in Russia. Second, a fear of repression by their respective authorities in Central Asia is minimised. "Unlike in my country, you can easily go to a mosque here [in Russia] and no one will question you" said one of the migrants. This relative freedom (of practicing religion) in Russia was repeated several times in interviews with other migrants as well.

4. Analysis and Discussion

The majority of Central Asian migrants see their living circumstances as a hostile environment. What is a hostile environment for a migrant? First and foremost, it is the mostly negative attitude of nationalist individuals or groups and media. Most migrants feel the pressures associated with being an unwelcome guest. Secondly, poor living and working conditions, frequent abuse by police and other government agencies as well as by employers, occasional attacks by aggressive nationalist youngsters in combination with other factors mentioned, mean that many Central Asian migrants feel disenfranchised in their everyday lives. As Van der Bracht et al. (2013), noted, perceived discrimination has a positive effect on the religiosity of a significant number of migrants.

As mentioned above, immigrant religiosity in Western countries has been widely explored. The findings of scholars on sources and causes of immigrants' insecurity are mostly be relevant to identity issues of Muslims (and other immigrants) in North America and several Western European countries. Then questions may rise: in what way is Russia's case different? How are Muslim migrants different from those in Western countries?

The case of Central Asian migrants in Russia, as Muslims in a mostly non-Muslim society, is different from the case of Muslims in the West for several reasons. First, populations of both Russia and Central Asian countries have an experience of living in a single state under a single political regime for several generations. While many Muslims of, say, Britain or France see the British and the French as former colonizers, ill feeling among Central Asians towards the Russians is less pronounced thanks to the USSR's *affirmative action* policy (Martin, 2001).

Second, almost three generations of Central Asians lived in a state where atheism was a state policy and religious practices were largely restricted (Ro'i, 2000). Therefore, though Muslims constitute the majority in Central Asian countries, the level of religiosity and the ways in which people perceive their Muslim identity in these societies are quite different, mostly because of having lived in an officially atheist country, compared to that of Muslims from the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia (Khalid, 2007; Louw, 2007).

Third, labour migration of Central Asians to Russia is a relatively new phenomenon which has reached its peak only in recent years. Last, but not least, the majority of Central Asian migrants go to Russia for seasonal work (the share of those who choose to stay for a long term is very small), while the majority of Muslims from other parts

⁷ Interview with Alisher via Skype in Moscow, March 2015.

of the world move to Western countries with the long-term aim to settle down, obtain legal status, bring their families with them and raise their children there. That is why I am using the term 'labour migrant' deliberately in this article.

Accordingly, Central Asian migrants in Russia and Muslim immigrants in the West have different approaches to and strategies for adaptation and assimilation in their host countries. All these factors make the situation in Russia different from the Western countries and require a separate inquiry into the case.

Though both Central Asians and Russians had lived in a single country for about three generations, cultural differences among them still prevail: Russians differ very much culturally from Central Asians. They often find themselves struggling to adapt to norms of social behaviour which are different from those accepted in their home societies. This factor also contributes to the alienation of migrants.

No less important is the factor of living separately from families, as it sharpens the sense of homesickness among migrants. In these isolated circumstances in Russia, a hostile environment, Central Asian labour migrants seek something that could comfort and console them. As argued by Alexei Malashenko, "it was only to be expected that a community living largely isolated from the host society would seek solace in a shared culture or belief" (IWPR 2014).

Relatively easy access to religious materials such as video clips and audio recordings (on social media) play their role as well, thanks to the fast development of and increase in the number of users of social media platforms. Many migrants find themselves exposed to an abundance of online religious materials, and this may affect their religious feelings and worldview. The case provided by Tucker (2015) is an illustration of how a young migrant became more religious and eventually fell victim to Islamic State recruiters through social media. "It is no surprise that these arguments appear to be more compelling to disenfranchised Central Asians already experiencing everyday discrimination as migrant labourers in a rapidly nationalizing Russia" (Tucker, 2014: 5).

Islamic organisations such as mosques, be they officially registered big mosques or the ones that operate unofficially in privately rented offices, as well as gatherings of believers, are other important factors in the possible changes in the religious practices of migrants. Observers believe that such communities in large cities of Russia play a significant role in providing consolation and 'moral guidance' for migrants who find life in Russia difficult.

It is no wonder that people look for an opportunity to join a group in which he can get ready meanings. Islamic meanings in this regard, firstly, are consistent internally, and secondly, provide guidance on the interaction with alternative meanings and their carriers; as a result, they are resistant to both individual woes and the collective "propaganda attack." One of the modes of conversation of the mosque attenders can be called a "practical theology" in which ordinary community members talk about God and Islam, tell each other *hadiths* of the Sunnah, as well as try to interpret their own life conflicts through the prism of Islam and to understand what is correct according to Islamic standards (Varshaver & Rocheva, 2014: para. 67).

Olimova (2015) also pays attention to the importance of trust that Islamic institutions provide among migrants. The significance of the role of religious institutions and networks among Central Asian labour migrants can be explained by the fact that they are based on trust and credibility. To the extent that a crisis of trust among migrant networks occurred, religious institutions began to occupy a more major role in the life of migrants. "Currently mosques and *jamoats* (religious communities) provide basic services to migrants such as assistance with employment, registration, search for housing, and protection. I would also add that religion saves migrants from the (moral) spoilage in major metropolitan areas, where a lot of temptations are present" (Olimova, 2015).

As noted, reasons for becoming more religious in Russia have many different roots and causes. But in very short terms, they all can be attributed to many migrants' feelings of insecurity and their perception of Russia as an unwelcoming context. Of course, many factors and theories in previous works (mostly related to Western Europe and North America) are relevant to the Russian case as well. They may play different roles, some to a bigger extent and some to a lesser, in affecting the religious worldview of many migrants. However, we believe that the feeling of insecurity contributes significantly to changes in the religious behaviour of Central Asian migrants. At the same time, it should be noted that insecurity feelings theory is not only about economic insecurities as it was explored in the West (Norris & Inglehart, 2004). Immerzeel & van Tubergen (2013) have extended the theory to existential insecurities, but the existential insecurity should go beyond personal experience of a war and death of a friend (as the mentioned authors have argued) and should include *inter alia* the explicit expression of xenophobia in public discourse often accompanied by physical and psychological violence in migrants' living conditions. Hard living and working conditions add to the feelings of psychological insecurity. The situation is dramatized by how migrants feel themselves to be unwanted guests.

5. Conclusion

This article demonstrated that the precarious living conditions of migrants contains situations which may serve as fertile soil for some of them to become more religious. It argued that insecurity theory should be looked upon more broadly to explain growing religiosity among immigrants. The very living conditions of a migrant, the environment he lives in and circumstances he faces every day in Russia, incline and push him to seek solace and comfort in religion. It is suggested that the feelings of insecurity—not only economic (in terms of finding a job, mostly), but also psychological and existential—are critical factors in such circumstances. Previous research on immigrant religiosity in the West has mostly focused on economic and, to a lesser degree, existential, aspects of insecurity while explaining the religious behaviour of immigrants. However, in Russia's case, psychological and existential (physical) insecurities play a more apparent role in affecting the religious behaviour of many Central Asian migrants while not ignoring the importance of feelings of economic insecurity.

In Central Asian countries, Islam is under strict control of government bodies. When most migrants come to Russia, they feel relieved of omnipresent government control (of their religious lives) and enjoy relative freedom in their religious practices. On the other hand, migrants, Muslims in their absolute majority, encounter dislike and disapproval by local populations in Russia who perceive them as dangerous and unwanted. These two factors also contribute to the growing religiosity of Central Asian labour migrants.

This article does not claim that all migrants become more religious. On the contrary, hundreds of thousands of migrants do not change their religious practices at any level in Russia. However, given the fact that today many in Russia see a terrorist threat in large Central Asian migrant communities (especially after the April 2017 terrorist attack), this phenomenon should be taken seriously and studied thoroughly. This article claims to be a small and introductory piece to explore the topic of current interest.

This study hopes to open opportunities for further research. In particular, the growing role of mosques in the adaptation and integration processes of migrants in Russia should be explored more deeply. Fragmented and scattered information from interviews with migrants and media reports suggest that mosques have been playing a significant role in the changes in religious behaviour of many migrants. Another topic for discussion could relate to a possible change of religious authorities for migrants. We know that, as it has been since the Soviet period, village elders who have also served as *imams* have been and still are authorities in religious matters for the absolute majority of Central Asians. But this changes in urban areas of Russia when migrants encounter with relatively young and educated *imams*. This is for another research topic: how the Islam that the migrants find in Russia is different from that in their home countries.

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